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Overcoming the Psychology of High School

Wild Youth

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Summer 2005

Retrieved on 20 August 2018 from
[http://greenanarchy.anarchyplanet.org/files/2012/05/
greenanarchy20.pdf](http://greenanarchy.anarchyplanet.org/files/2012/05/greenanarchy20.pdf)
from *Green Anarchy* #20, Summer 2005

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her time really gets going. I have only looked at a few aspects of what really is a multifaceted microcosm of alienation. We must theorize further if we are to thoroughly understand the psychology of high school and how to liberate ourselves from its crippling grips. It is equally as important for us to test our theory through practice. By playing around with different methods of subversion we can discover the weak spots in our theory and the institution it seeks to destroy. We also have to heal the spiritual and psychological lesions that high school has inflicted upon us and there is no better self-therapy than joyous revolt.

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ation, the high school student feels self-worth insofar as she participates and excels in the institution that surrounds him. When the high school student begins to fall behind his classmates in the competitive consumption of curricula, she succumbs to the castigation of teachers and parents and internalizes the constraint. He/she has now learnt to feel satisfaction only when an inhuman institution applauds his/her output.

Fragmentation

The fragmentation of daily experience and social activity outside of high school is a firmly ensconced public secret. How this manifests for the high school student is particularly noxious. Accelerating what started as soon as she entered the schoolyard as a child, the high school student's world is violently divided in two: the educational and the non-educational⁹. What little learning is done within high school assumes far greater importance – a predictable result when the high school student's spectacular role is contingent on their high school success – than that which is not. This incredibly limiting dualism tears apart what is naturally a holistic experience and depreciates learning done outside of school. So much so that the high school student forgets how to learn without being taught and/or fails to recognise and appreciate edifying experiences outside the walls of high school. The inverse of this fragmentation is that there is now a specific time and place for those experiences that are not considered to be educational. Hence the high school student relegates partying, art, music, property damage and other joyous activities to weekends and holidays alone. Here the high school student is seduced by the temporality of the spectacle and the compartmentalization of

⁹ I'm rather uncomfortable using the term education due to its prevailing connotations. Though there exist several dictionary definitions for education that do not imply an externally directed formal process.

tivity of others brings the high school student to the brink of suicidal desperation⁶. Well-accustomed to the unending pursuit of higher and higher *grades*, those who emerge from high school seemingly unscathed are well and truly desensitised to civilization's fixation with greater and greater *value*⁷.

Alienated Activity

Before the high school student is alienated in the sphere of production – for he has long been alienated in the sphere of social consumption – she is alienated in the sphere of instruction. The alienated activity of the high school student does not produce a tangible commodity, thus no surplus value is created and consequently exploitation in the traditional sense does not occur. Nevertheless, the form and content of his/her schooling is determined by an institution and their experiences therein are reified. The daily activity of the individual high school student bears no distinction⁸ from their peers who all regard their movements as mere “school work”. They exercise no control over the form and content of their instruction and so what little they do achieve becomes the achievement of an institution, as it was an institution that presided over the entire experience from beginning to end. Education really does become something other and this explains the visceral contempt and disinterest many students feel towards high school. Like all alien-

⁶ In many cases young people cross this divide and can simply not endure the pain of high school any longer. We need to show that while suicide may expedite survival the only way to life is through the joyous revolt of desire.

⁷ I draw a parallel between the pursuit of grades and the pursuit of value, as the former really is just one of civilization's many value systems. Any qualitative richness that may miraculously arise during high school is always subordinated to quantitative success.

⁸ While it may be true that the activity of high school students during school actually is identical in that they have a limited number of curricula to consume, the subjective responses are plethoric despite this standardization.

¹ Every high-school student and anyone who has ever attended high school is intimately familiar with the psychology of high school. In point of fact, the psychology of high school is the pathology of commodity-society and thus it is not enough to say that everyone is well acquainted with the psycho-malaise of high school, but rather this institutional psycho-malaise is *the psychology of individuals themselves*. Of course this should come as no surprise considering that the principal function of school is widely accepted – amongst revolutionaries at least – as being the reproduction of the social relations of capital. What is surprising is the dearth of rigorous, specific and revolutionary critiques of high school². Apart from Ivan Illich's seminal polemic *Deschooling Society*, little attention has been paid to the elaborate workings of school. It is totally inadequate for our critique of high school to be a mere appendage on a position paper consisting of a few anti-authoritarian platitudes (we oppose authority so we naturally reject conventional schooling). The many deleterious facets of high school must be analysed in full and their instrumental role in capital's domestication of humanity elucidated.

Because high school acts as capital's incubator, some of the dominations and contradictions inherent in capital naturally

¹ I have focused on high school specifically instead of school generally not because there is any fundamental difference between elementary and secondary school, but because the methods of conditioning are intensified in the latter. It also helps that I currently find myself there.

² To be honest, the lack of a critique of school amongst so-called radicals does not surprise me in the slightest. In fact, the number of social democrats masquerading as revolutionaries who either *apologize* for high school or blatantly support it are no small few. An even larger number of solid comrades unfortunately just fall short of really understanding the domination of high school. To be fair though, one must take into account that many revolutionaries were not revolutionary during their high school years and as a result any retroactive critique of school will struggle to really appreciate the magnitude of its oppression.

appear in an analogous form within high school, while some couldn't be said to appear at all³. But those that do manifest do so in a way endemic to high school and thus should be treated specifically. I hope to briefly illuminate those that I have come to recognise and which collectively constitute the psychology of high school as personally experienced. I also hope to open up discourse on the subject and stimulate further critical analyses of high school by high school students themselves. We can only overcome the psychology of high school if we understand its processes and how we have been conditioned thus far.

The Perversion of Desire

It is self-evident that high school – as one of the institutions of capital – seeks to transform individuals into productive automatons. How it does this isn't quite as clear. Sure, the same manipulative techniques are used as elsewhere in the spectacle, but what does this look like exactly and how does it feel? The high school student's desire to explore and experiment with the world of knowledge – if it has survived years of previous schooling – is brutally perverted to serve the interests of industrial society⁴. High school falsely satisfies this desire by offering a clockwork-like sequence of curricular consumption and measured performance with the ostensible purpose of education and development. In the face of this overwhelming normality, the high school student abandons all dreams of passionate

³ No matter how hard I look I can't find, for example, wage slavery and the extraction of surplus value occurring within high school, although the preparation is clearly taking place. Could one posit that we produce value-to-be-realized every time we consume and regurgitate curricular thereby determining our future position in the capitalist mode of production?

⁴ Needless to say, the infinite desires of the high school student – just like the rest of humanity – outside of the realm of inquiry are also mutilated and re-directed to serve the interests of capital. Our desire to play is replaced by the consumption of economic pseudo-pleasures and so forth.

inquiry, creative trial and error and ever-expanding learning experiences. Some will never even notice this happening. For others this resignation is a tragically conscious decision that must be made if they are to ever feel happy and successful⁵. Once the high school student embraces externally dictated education, she becomes *in fact* nothing more than a high school student whose primary concern is fulfilling her role par excellence. Once this process is complete the high school student is ready for the externally dictated activity of the world of work.

Quantification

The educational guise of high school can scarcely conceal the true nature of this formidable institution. At every stage, the high school student questions the necessity of some protocol, some formality to the overall success of their education. As soon as the illusion is torn down and high school is seen in its true functional light – a method of determining another wage slave's position in the work pyramid – the need for its vast bureaucratic modus operandi will become apparent. High school students are spot on when they declare that examinations and year-round assessments have nothing to do with education. For the pathological evaluation and measurement of the high school student's performance does not facilitate their education but rather acclimates them to the logic of civilization: that creative activity, the pursuit of knowledge, personal growth and even life itself *must* be quantified, analysed and reduced to some abstract form. We cannot even begin to discuss the impact this has on both the spirit and the psyche of the high school student. The anxiety, guilt and helplessness evoked by being constantly assessed and compared to the alienated ac-

⁵ This scenario is all too real for me. I just recently lost a friend to the logic of high school who openly admitted that the pursuance of an alternative was simply too hard.